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or dangerous diplomacy?

In authorizing secret arms-for-hostages negotiations with Iran, President Reagan has committed what may turn out to be the biggest diplomatic blunder of his administration.

The decision to obtain freedom for American hostages in Lebanon by provisioning Iran with military equipment has severely undermined the administration's credibility at home and abroad.

The bizarre scheme has cast doubt on the judgment of the president and a number of his top aides. It also has raised serious questions about the decision-making process in the White House.

The president's obvious desire to end the suffering of the hostages is commendable, as is the administration's interest in improving ties with Iran. Before Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was toppled, Iran was an important American ally. Its strategic location and oil would make it a valuable asset again.

But the administration has gone too far in attempting to curry favor with Iran when there is no assurance that the Ayatollah Khomeini will be replaced by a more moderate and pro-Western regime.

The president and his subordinates repeatedly have claimed in public that they will not do business with terrorists. In private, the administration apparently is willing to provide weapons as ransom payments for the hostages and as protection payments against future terrorism.

The logical perception is that the administration has surrendered to the Moslem extremist thugs who rule in Tehran.

Inasmuch as it had been pressing European allies to block arms shipments to Iran and to take a tough stand against terrorism, the administration now appears guilty of gross hypocrisy. Succumbing to extortion invites more extortion. Paying ransom for hostages provides incentive for taking new hostages.

The administration's standing in Europe already had deteriorated, due to its willingness to remove American missiles from the conti-

nent in an arms deal with the Soviet Union. European skepticism about American intentions, therefore, is only intensified by this latest episode. So are the fears of moderate Arab states.

Additional arms will assist Iran in its war with Iraq. Anything that strengthens the Iranian regime is cause for alarm to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Arab states on the Persian Gulf. A victorious Iran could threaten the stability of the Arab governments which now are a reliable source of oil for the West.

The administration's regrettable dealings with Iran have occurred despite the reported misgivings of the two Cabinet members directly responsible for American diplomacy and defense. Both Secretary of State George Shultz and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger are reported to have been opposed to the misguided plan.

The president, however, is said to have heeded two other aides — National Security Adviser John M. Poindexter and CIA Director William J. Casey. Both previously had managed to get the administration into hot water with intemperate ideas. Mr. Poindexter's Libya disinformation caper and Mr. Casey's threats against the media proved major embarrassments to the administration, whether the president has realized it or not.

It is said that the Iranian operation was run directly from the White House for fear that involvement of the CIA, which must report covert operations to Congress, would result in premature leaks. If so, what use is the CIA for any covert work?

It should have been evident to the administration that the government in Tehran was more likely to disclose the negotiations conducted by former National Security Adviser Robert D. McFarlane and the secretive Lt. Col. Oliver North of the NSC staff.

Members of the appropriate committees of the House and Senate have good reason to be asking questions about the administration's clandestine diplomacy with Iran. The White House has not been particularly forthcoming. But the Democrats now control both cham-

bers of Congress. The administration will not be able to avoid a thorough inquiry, as mortifying as it may be.

Hopefully, the disclosures thus far and the inevitable congressional investigations will convince President Reagan he should listen more carefully to the prudent counsel of Mr. Weinberger and Mr. Shultz than to the loose cannons on the White House deck.

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